

# Teaching Reading National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy December 2005

## Executive summary

Underlying this report by the Committee for the *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy* is the conviction that effective literacy teaching, and of reading in particular, should be grounded in findings from rigorous evidence-based research. The global economic, technological and social changes underway, requiring responses from an increasingly skilled workforce, make evidence-based high-quality schooling an imperative. Nowhere is this more important than in the teaching of *reading* (a key element of literacy) since reading competence is foundational, not only for school-based learning, but also for children's behavioural and psychosocial wellbeing, further education and training, occupational success, productive and fulfilling participation in social and economic activity, as well as for the nation's social and economic future.

The evidence is clear, whether from research, good practice observed in schools, advice from submissions to the Inquiry, consultations, or from Committee members' own individual experiences, that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. This approach, coupled with effective support from the child's home, is critical to success.

The attention of the Inquiry Committee was drawn to a dichotomy between phonics and whole-language approaches to the teaching of reading. This dichotomy is false. Teachers must be able to draw on techniques most suited to the learning needs and abilities of the child. It was clear, however, that systematic phonics instruction is critical if children are to be taught to read well, whether or not they experience reading difficulties. Members of the Committee found it a moment of awe to observe an effective teacher, with a full range of skills to teach reading, working with a whole class and having each child productively develop their literacy skills. Such teaching is highly skilled and professional. Teachers require a range of teaching strategies upon which they can draw, that meet the developmental and learning needs of individual children. The provision of such a repertoire of teaching skills is a challenge for teacher education institutions, and to practicing teachers as they assume the responsibility for the literacy learning of a whole class.

The Inquiry found strong evidence that a whole-language approach to the teaching of reading on its own is not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties. Moreover, where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children's literacy progress is significantly impeded, inhibiting their initial and subsequent growth in reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension.

Much curriculum design, content, teaching and teacher preparation seems to be based, at least implicitly, on an educational philosophy of *constructivism* (an established theory of *knowing* and *learning* rather than a theory of *teaching*). Yet the Inquiry found there is a serious lack of supporting evidence for its effectiveness in teaching children to read. Further, too often emphasis is given to the nature of the child's environment or background rather than on how a teacher should teach, resulting in insufficient attention being given to both 'what' and 'how' teachers should teach children to read and write. Whereas the 'starting' levels of children from less advantaged backgrounds is lower than those from more advantaged backgrounds, findings from a large body of evidence-based research consistently indicate that quality teaching has significant positive effects on students' achievement progress regardless of their backgrounds.

The Committee came to the view that since the effective teaching of reading is a highly developed professional skill, teachers must be adequately prepared both in their pre-service education and during subsequent years of practice, if children are to achieve at levels consistent with their potential. The quality of teaching provided is fundamental to children's success in reading, and several of the recommendations are directed to this end. Indeed, this report places a major emphasis on *teacher quality*, and on building capacity in teachers towards quality, evidence-based teaching practices that are demonstrably effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of all students.

The Inquiry found that the preparation of new teachers to teach reading is uneven across universities, and that an evidence-based and integrated approach including instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension needs to be adopted. The Inquiry also found that systematic support for classroom teachers to build the appropriate skills to teach reading effectively, is clearly inadequate.

Teaching standards and student achievement standards are two interlocking issues fundamental to the determination of reading outcomes. The first refers to those standards to be reached by a new teacher by the time they graduate, as well as to those

that a teacher requires if they are to be described as an accomplished teacher of reading. These matters are dealt with in some detail in the report, and a way forward is proposed so that teacher education institutions are clear about the teaching standards that should be met in their courses, and in establishing standards for teachers of reading. The second refers to standards to be reached and the levels of accomplishment of students at various stages in their development.

The Inquiry Committee came to a view that the assessment of all children by their teachers at school entry and regularly during the early years of schooling is of critical importance to the teaching of reading, and in particular, to identify children who are at risk of not making adequate progress. The early identification of children experiencing reading difficulties means that interventions to provide support for these children can be put in place early. This early assessment should be a key element of responsible system and school literacy planning and monitoring.

In addition, the reading growth of individual children should be closely monitored by ongoing assessment to inform parents, as well as provide feedback information that can be used to guide teaching and learning. Information gathered from these formative assessments may then be used to shape improvements and to adjust teaching strategies that meet individual students' learning needs.

The Inquiry Committee supports the current assessment of students' literacy achievements against national benchmarks and proposes their extension so that the results for individual children are available for diagnostic and intervention purposes. The Committee noted that data from external assessments are already provided in ways that schools can evaluate, review and develop their overall teaching programs. Timely and reliable diagnostic information about the progress of individual children in reports to parents and to other teachers are essential. To assist the transfer of achievement information as students move from school to school and from state to state, mechanisms are also proposed to make this process a long-overdue national reality.

The Committee notes the fundamental importance of literacy in schooling and the recommendations it proposes are designed to make effective evidence-based practices accessible to all teachers and so influence positively all children in Australian schools. Health professionals draw attention to the overlap that is often evident between students' under-achievement in literacy (especially in reading) and their poor behavioural health and wellbeing. Dealing with reading problems early, as outlined in this report, should assist in the alleviation of this seemingly intractable problem.

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## Evidence-based approaches to the teaching of reading

The Inquiry found that many teaching approaches used in schools are not informed by findings from evidence-based research, and that too many teachers do not have a clear understanding of why, how, what and when to use particular strategies. This has important implications for pre-service teacher education, ongoing teacher professional learning, and for the design and content of literacy curricula. This leads to the Committee's first two and most important recommendations, both of which are designed so that teachers are provided with knowledge and teaching skills that are demonstrably effective in meeting the developmental and learning needs of children from a diverse range of backgrounds during their first three years of schooling, and thereafter where necessary.

1. The Committee recommends that teachers be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children.
2. The Committee recommends that teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.

Such instruction arising from these two recommendations must be part of an intellectually challenging literacy environment that is inclusive of all children.

While the evidence indicates that some teaching strategies are more effective than others, no one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties. An integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when and why to apply them.

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3. The Committee recommends that literacy teaching continue throughout schooling (K-12) in all areas of the curriculum. Literacy must be the responsibility of all teachers across the curriculum, to provide an educationally sound program meeting the specific skill and knowledge needs of individual children from diverse backgrounds and locations.

## The role of parents

The Committee recognised the importance of the years before school in giving children the best start to their literacy development. While it is the responsibility of schools to teach children to read and write, there are many things that parents and carers can do to assist in the development of their children's literacy skills, such as regular adult-child and child-adult reading aloud activities. Supporting parents in endeavours of this kind, particularly during the early years of schooling, leads to the following recommendation.

4. The Committee recommends that programs, guides and workshops be provided for parents and carers to support their children's literacy development. These should acknowledge and build on the language and literacy that children learn in their homes and communities.

## School leadership and management

The Inquiry came to a view from the evidence that successful teaching of reading occurs best where there is a consistent and comprehensive whole-school approach that is clearly specified in a *literacy plan*. Such plans give priority to the teaching of literacy across the curriculum at every level of primary and secondary schooling. Implementation of the plan should be the responsibility of all teachers under the leadership and direction of the principal and senior staff. The outcome of the plan must be that children and young people in primary and secondary schools have the level of literacy that enables them to proceed successfully to the next stage of their lives, whether it be further schooling, tertiary education or work.

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5. The Committee recommends that all education authorities and school leaders examine their approaches to the teaching of literacy and put in place an explicit, whole-school literacy planning, monitoring and reviewing process in collaboration with school communities and parents.

This process should be comprehensive and recognise the learning needs of children experiencing difficulty in learning to read and write, as well as extending successful readers and writers, so that all children can proceed with every likelihood of success to the next stage of their lives.

Effective leadership is an important factor in developing whole-school approaches to the teaching of reading and to provide staff with the necessary ongoing professional support. Without exception, the schools visited by Committee members for the Inquiry demonstrated strong leadership from the principal and the school leadership team that impacted positively on student literacy learning and teacher professional learning. Findings from research, evidence from the consultations and site visits, as well as many submissions led to the following recommendation.

6. The Committee recommends that all schools identify a highly trained specialist literacy teacher with specialised skills in teaching reading, to be responsible for linking the whole-school literacy planning process with classroom teaching and learning, and supporting school staff in developing, implementing and monitoring progress against individual literacy plans, particularly for those children experiencing reading and literacy difficulties.

Together with the leadership team, the specialist literacy teacher would be key to identifying and providing professional learning for school staff. The specialist literacy teacher would need to be resourced appropriately so that sufficient time is dedicated to supporting staff in their professional learning.

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7. The Committee recommends that specialist postgraduate studies in literacy (especially in teaching reading) be provided by higher education providers to support the skill base and knowledge of teachers, including the specialist literacy teachers.

## Standards for teaching

Given the importance of literacy competence to children's engagement in schooling, and to their subsequent educational progress and life chances, the Inquiry Committee received strong recommendations from peak stakeholder groups for the specification of literacy teaching standards. To gain professional credibility and commitment, and to acknowledge the highly professional nature of the teaching of reading, especially during the primary years, such standards must be developed by the profession, serve the public interest, and be applied nationally. The Committee was mindful of the work currently underway both nationally and in the States and Territories in developing standards. This work should be built on and leads to the following recommendation.

8. The Committee recommends that Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, in consultation with relevant professional associations, employers from the government and Catholic school sectors and representatives of the independent school sector, together with relevant teacher institutes and registration bodies, develop and implement national standards for literacy teaching, initial teacher registration, and for accomplished teaching, consistent with evidence-based guides for practice. It is further recommended that these standards form a basis for the accreditation of teacher preparation courses.

## Assessment

The Committee acknowledged the critical importance of assessment, if teachers are to be in the best position to help their students. Assessment serves multiple purposes: to diagnose and remediate essential skills, measure growth and monitor progress, provide feedback to learners, and for reporting to parents and education systems.



The Committee is aware that issues surrounding student assessment and reporting of and for learning are a high priority with State and Territory education jurisdictions and schools. There are many examples across the country where teachers and schools are being informed by assessment data. Such schools recognise the importance of frequent and ongoing monitoring of reading proficiency and growth in the early years.

The Committee discussed the advantages of further developing national approaches to student assessment and reporting, particularly where the results of these assessments could be used by teachers to guide their practice and be provided to parents to inform them of their child's progress. That is, the Committee identified a need for nationally consistent diagnostic screening tools to be developed for use when children begin school to identify their development of: auditory processing capacity; speech and language; fine and gross motor coordination skills; letter identification; and letter-sound correspondences. Findings from this objective assessment of specific skills would form the basis on which to plan learning and measure individual reading development, and should also be provided to parents. To address these issues, the following recommendations are made.

9. The Committee recommends that the teaching of literacy throughout schooling be informed by comprehensive, diagnostic and developmentally appropriate assessments of every child, mapped on common scales. Further, it is recommended that:
  - nationally consistent assessments on-entry to school be undertaken for every child, including regular monitoring of decoding skills and word reading accuracy using objective testing of specific skills, and that these link to future assessments;
  - education authorities and schools be responsible for the measurement of individual progress in literacy by regularly monitoring the development of each child and reporting progress twice each year for the first three years of schooling; and
  - the Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 national literacy testing program be refocused to make available diagnostic information on individual student performance, to assist teachers to plan the most effective teaching strategies.



The Inquiry identified the issue of mobility as one that needs to be addressed by education authorities. Each year, approximately 100,000 students change schools across State and Territory boundaries, sectors and regions. Mobility is an issue, particularly for the education of children from Indigenous, newly arrived non-English-speaking, and Defence Force backgrounds. A long-overdue mechanism to track individual children throughout their schooling, so that a record of achievement and progress can follow them wherever they attend school, is seen as essential. This would benefit transient students, their parents and the schools to which they move. Such a mechanism would need appropriate protocols to protect privacy.

10. The Committee recommends that a confidential mechanism such as a unique student identifier be established to enable information on an individual child's performance to follow the child regardless of location, and to monitor a child's progress throughout schooling and across assessment occasions.

## The preparation of teachers

The Inquiry Committee concludes that teaching practices and instructional strategies *per se* are not independent of the teachers who deliver them, whether or not children experience reading difficulties. Highly effective teachers and their professional learning *do* make a difference in the classroom. It is not so much what students bring with them from their backgrounds, but what they experience on a day-to-day basis in interaction with teachers and other students that matters. Teaching quality has strong effects on children's experiences of schooling, including their attitudes, behaviours and achievement outcomes (see Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Thus, there is need for a major focus on teacher quality, and building capacity in teachers towards quality, evidence-based teaching practices that are demonstrably effective in maximising the developmental and learning needs of all children. This is the case for both teacher education and the ongoing professional learning provided to teachers throughout their careers. Pre-service teacher education is the first phase of a teacher's ongoing commitment to professional learning.

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Responses to the national survey of primary teacher preparation courses undertaken by this Inquiry indicate that in almost all of those nominated, less than 10 per cent of time in compulsory subjects/units is devoted to preparing student teachers to teach reading. They also indicated that in half of all courses, less than five per cent of total instructional time is devoted to this task.

Although the Inquiry has concluded that there are significant opportunities for improvement in teacher preparation, it is concerned that an evidence-based approach be adopted in the implementation of the recommendations. Increasing the time on reading instruction, improving the content of teacher preparation courses and school practice arrangements, together with improvements in new graduates' personal literacy should all be examined to secure a firm evidence-base for teacher preparation. Also, there is little evidence on the most effective way to prepare pre-service teachers to teach reading. This must be given much more research attention by higher education providers.

11. The Committee recommends that the key objective of primary teacher education courses be to prepare student teachers to teach reading, and that the content of course-work in primary literacy education focus on contemporary understandings of:
  - evidence-based findings and an integrated approach to the teaching of reading, including instruction on how to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension;
  - child and adolescent development; and
  - inclusive approaches to literacy teaching.
12. The Committee recommends that literacy teaching within subject areas be included in the coursework of secondary teachers so that they are well prepared to continue the literacy development of their students throughout secondary schooling in all areas of the curriculum.

13. The Committee recommends that significant national 'lighthouse' projects in teacher preparation and education be established to link theory and practice that effectively prepare pre-service teachers to teach literacy, and especially reading, to diverse groups of children.
14. The Committee recommends that the conditions for teacher registration of graduates from all primary and secondary teacher education programs include a demonstrated command of personal literacy skills necessary for effective teaching, and a demonstrated ability to teach literacy within the framework of their employment/teaching program.

## Ongoing professional learning

Professional learning throughout a teacher's career is vital to building capacity in literacy teaching (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

For the teaching of reading, quality teaching depends upon knowledge of how students best learn to read, how to assess reading ability and growth, and how to use assessment information to apply appropriate intervention strategies from a repertoire of effective practices informed by findings from evidence-based research. It involves knowing students and understanding their diverse backgrounds and learning needs from observation and monitoring.

Ongoing professional learning is essential for teachers to teach reading. Opportunities for professional learning can take many forms, including quality induction programs, teachers' shared and collaborative learning in school, work in professional learning teams, mentoring, and professional learning for principals and school literacy leaders.

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15. The Committee recommends that schools and employing authorities, working with appropriate professional organisations and higher education institutions, provide all teachers with appropriate induction and mentoring throughout their careers, and with ongoing opportunities for evidence-based professional learning about effective literacy teaching.

There is strong evidence that professional learning focused on subject matter knowledge and knowledge about how students best learn, when coupled with a clear understanding of contextual issues faced by teachers in the classroom, improves teaching and learning. Research findings also indicate the importance of linking professional learning to curriculum materials and assessments.

16. The Committee recommends that a national program of literacy action be established to:
- *design* a series of evidence-based teacher professional learning programs focused on effective classroom teaching, and later interventions for those children experiencing reading difficulties;
  - *produce* a series of evidence-based guides for effective teaching practice, the first of which should be on reading;
  - *evaluate* the effectiveness of approaches to early literacy teaching (especially for early reading) and professional learning programs for practising teachers;
  - *investigate* ways of integrating the literacies of information and communication technologies with traditional literacies in the classroom;
  - *establish* networks of literacy/reading specialist practitioners to facilitate the application of research to practice; and
  - *promote* research into the most effective teaching practices to be used when preparing pre-service teachers to teach reading.
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Given that significant funding is provided by the Australian and State and Territory governments to support the ongoing professional learning of teachers, the Inquiry concluded that there was a need for more effective coordination of funding and effort in this area.

17. The Committee recommends that Australian and State and Territory governments' approaches to literacy improvement be aligned to achieve improved outcomes for all Australian children.
18. The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, together with State and Territory government and non-government education authorities, jointly support the proposed national program for literacy action.

## Looking forward

There was a clear consensus view among members of the Inquiry Committee to emphasise the importance of *quality teaching* and *teacher quality*. These areas continue to be given strong financial support by the Australian Government, and recommendations from this Inquiry will place added demands on resources if major improvements to teacher professionalism in the area of children's literacy and learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing are to occur.

Quality literacy teaching is central to these outcomes, and especially for early reading acquisition and subsequent development. This will not be realised until teachers receive evidence-based knowledge and skill development in their pre-service preparation and are supported via in-service professional development. The level of this support must be commensurate with teachers' invaluable contributions to the enrichment of children's wellbeing and life chances, as well as to capacity building for the nation's social and economic future.

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For all children, learning to read and write effectively requires effort and commitment from many stakeholders: education authorities, principals and their associations, teachers and their professional associations, the deans of education, health professionals, parents and parent organisations. Responsibility for achieving this ambitious goal at the highest levels leads to the Committee's final recommendations that -

19. The Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training raise these recommendations as issues for attention and action by MCEETYA, and other bodies, agencies and authorities, that will have responsibility to take account of, and implement the recommendations.
  20. Progress in implementing these recommendations, and on the state of literacy in Australia, be reviewed and reported every two years.
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